COMMUNION MEDITATION
May 20, 1973

John 15:1-10
I John 3:18-24

I was interested to read an article recently about the status of religion in the Soviet Union. Officially the government extends freedom of religion to all citizens. But unofficially the party line is still that ("religion is the opiate of the masses".) Bibles are hard to come by: religious literature can not be printed, sold or distributed; clergymen are carefully watched for any word or act that might be construed as critical of the government, and generally the Russian people are encouraged to regard the church as an archiac relic of the past.

So it was particularly intriguing to read about what happens in the ~~First~~ Baptist Church of Moscow on Sunday morning. It is a larger, well appointed building with a staff of eight ministers. There are three services on Sunday, and three more during the week. Every seat is filled, the aisles and stairways to the balcony are crammed with people standing. The author - who was on assignment by the Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions - reported that the service was lusty with great and enthusiastic singing: but the prayers were the most moving part of all. He couldn't understand the content very well - but all around him people began shuffling, and sniffing and wiping their eyes: and he sensed that everyone in the congregation was weeping. The same thing happened during the prayer at the end of the service: only this time he observed people reaching out to touch each other - to hold hands. And when it was over many of them embraced - in the sanctuary - and afterward out in the street.

Something was going on - something that transcended the barrier of language - something mystical was happening between people, something deep and real and fundamental, something that could be seen in their faces; something very important to them.

The mystical something was the presence of Jesus Christ in the midst of his people: they had shared it, celebrated it, and were obviously taking it with them as they left. It is the same somthing that Christian people have been sharing and celebrating down through the centuries in every conceivable kind of circumstance: in grand cathedrals and tiny country churches: at birth and at death: at marriage and at a sick bed.

In the ~~First~~ Baptist Church of Moscow, the way Jesus Christ is experienced is obviously influenced by external circumstances. (hostile environment: scorn, threat of jail.) And the vast difference between what happened there and what happens in a typical Protestant Church on Sunday morning may be explained partially

in those terms. So, also, do we ordinarily rationalize the difference between what happens on the pages of the New Testament and our own Christian experience.

The New Testament was written out of a crisis situation. The early Christian communities that produced the New Testament existed in a situation quite like that of the Baptist Church in Moscow. A minority, distinct from everyone else, alternatingly persecuted vicously and then ignored - which often turns out to be the most insidious persecution. In that external situation the mystical union of Jesus Christ and his people - and their bond with each other - becomes important, and so very real that it can be described in organic, life - like terms. Often is a matter of life & death. Christians in crisis have always been driven back to basics; crisis periods produce good in the way - courage under persecution Christians and Christian Churches suddenly become heroic. And the reason is martyrs that when the alternatives are clear - Christians have always seen that all they really have is Jesus Christ - and in his name - each other: and that realization has always had power and life and new love in it.

With that in mind, let's look briefly at the two texts which I read this morning. The first, from the fourth Gospel, is from a section known as the "Farewell Discourses." The scene is the Last Supper - the night of the arrest. The hopes of the disciples had been crushed under the brutal reality of Roman Power and religious legalism. The future looked very grim; and whatever was going to happen they knew it would not be good. The situation, then, is every bit as important as what he said.

("I am the vine - and you are the branches".) It was a familiar image. Ezekiel and Jeremiah had compared Israel to God's vine - God's vineyard. Everytime they entered the Temple they were reminded of that image by a carving of a vine on the gates. ("I am the true vine".) I am the source of your life - I am the strength to hold you up against the rain and the wind - any fruit you bear is a result of your holding on to me. And because I am the vine - you are related to each other in a particular and vital way. Apart from me - cut off from the vine - and the other branches - you can do nothing.

Sitting around the table of the Last Supper - those are striking words: they become, however because of our vastly different situation, something less, something weak and hollow when they are blithely announced by the minister at the Sacrament of Communion in an American Church in 1973.

The other reading was from First Epistle of John, written later - to people who were enduring some very real persectuin: people who had nothing going for them except each other.

And so the writer could say ("love must not be a matter of words or talk; it must be genuine and show itself in action...This is his command: to give our allegience to his Son Jesus Christ and love one another.)

There it is again: clear, sharp, uncluttered, unvarnished - the presence of Jesus Christ with his people and their relationship with each other in his name. That's all they had: that's all they needed. That's all we have - really:

And yet our situation is so radically different. It really didn't cost you anything to be here this morning - not really. Oh, it would have been pleasant to stay in bed, read the paper, play golf or cut the grass. But our culture will smile at you for being here: you certainly don't have to deal with the possibility that the paddy wagon just might be outside at 11:45 waiting to pick you up.

In terms of your relationship with the other branches which together constitute the congregation of Bethany Church - you don't need them - not really. At least not all of you - although some do - some in crisis. But for most of us it's a casual thing: we don't know each other too well: we have other friends - other resources if we get in trouble. I'm not being critical - because that's just the way it is.

And yet I am more than ordinarily sensitive to this reality this morning: because May means the hibernation period forthis congregation: the programs come to a halt -everything gets put on the shelf until fall - and each year I am driven back to the Biblical image of the Church; namely, that when everything else stops, all that is left is people. But particularly today - for me; because I'm leaving - and I look forward to the break from working at the programs of the Church: but I will miss you - the people - the only thing that matters here - really. Somehow, sometimes in spite of ourselves, Jesus Christ is shared and celebrated by this people - and that is what makes this a church. Apart from Jesus Christ - we can do nothing - we are nothing except strangers who rub shoulders occassionally on Sunday morning.

It's healthy, I think on occassion to deal with our faith in terms of just as simple as this. ~~Everything we do here is unimportant and trivial and expendable if Jesus Christ is not experienced, shared, honored and celebrated.~~

→ We don't flaunt our piety much. But let us not forget that we exist as a Church in the name of Jesus Christ and for his sake only. There is nothing else ultimately on our

agenda.

his union with us

And let us not forget that the presence of Jesus Christ in our midst is just an idea in the mind - until it is experienced in love between people. ("Not words - but genuine love" that is given flesh and blood by real people.

That is all we have here - that is all we are - people who belong to Jesus christ - and who belong, in his name, to each other. And that is all we need. AMEN

FATHER, we come to the Table of our Lord this morning as strangers. Bind us together - and through each other to you. In the name of Jesus Christ. AMEN